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Libermann's Instructions for Missionaries: Living the Life of Self-Giving Love. A Personal Reflection.

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His doctrine is referred to as a "beautiful treatise on Perfection,"...

LIBERMANN'S INSTRUCTIONS FOR MISSIONARIES: LIVING THE LIFE OF SELF-GIVING LOVE. A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Many years ago when I was Director of Immaculate Heart Seminary, now the Spiritan Center in Bethel Park, I had the privilege of living in community with wonderful Spiritans, one of whom was Walter van de Putte. He was already pushing ninety years of age, but was still active in mind, body, and spirit. One of his projects was translating various works and letters of Father Libermann. It was at that time that he introduced me to Libermann's *Instructions for Missionaries*, a previous translation of which he was revisiting.¹ Although I had had a wonderful novitiate experience under the direction of Father Clem Lachowsky, I do not remember during that year being introduced explicitly to that part of Libermann's writings. I read the *Instructions* on the recommendation of Father van de Putte but, to be candid, was not very moved by them. I thought that they would be giving me insights about missiology in relation to the then current interests related to mission as were being discussed in a prophetic way by Spiritans, such as Vincent Donovan and Eugene Hillman and other missiologists during the period prior to the Second Vatican Council. Besides, Libermann spoke in theological and spiritual categories and language that seemed to be in a time capsule. They seemed tedious and boring. I knew that they contained gems of insight about what it meant to live the Spiritan vocation, but it took too much work to unpack them and there was too much to think about in the active ministry and the responsibilities tied to being director of a seminary for college students. My lack of engagement with the *Instructions* probably stemmed from the fact that I was not ready at that stage of my own development as a person to grasp the depth of what Libermann was saying.

Interestingly enough, I also found that the *Instructions* had been published in 1949 in another form by Catholic Book Publishers and entitled *Living With God*. In that edition, Libermann's thought was presented as being applicable to the life of every Christian. In the Preface to that edition, Libermann is compared to Francis de Sales and John of the Cross in his insights about the spiritual life. His doctrine is referred to as a "beautiful treatise on Perfection," shedding "light on the way of perfection for all Christians – priests, religious and laity."

When writing about Libermann, Archbishop LeRoy, Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit from 1896 to 1926, wrote:

We cannot have a better guide than our Venerable Father. In following him we will assimilate his spirit of complete self-abnegation, of strength, of gentleness, and of union with God. Under his guidance, we will learn to be the kind of religious and missionary he wanted us to be...

In the various circumstances to which our vocation may lead us, and above all when we are called to make great sacrifices, we should consider ourselves fortunate to have at our side an intimate friend, a guide, a father who speaks to us through his writings.

... He continues to form us in the same spirit, to direct us along the solid road to holiness, to raise us constantly towards the supernatural, in everyplace, in every work where obedience may place us. In this way will we be truly faithful to our calling....

Categories and Language of another Time and Place

Some twenty years after my original encounter with Libermann in the *Instructions*, I took them up again to work through them to seek the gem which, for me, was hidden in categories and language of another time and place. I wanted to see what he was communicating to his followers concerning the matters which he considered essential for those seeking to live the Spiritan vocation at any moment or time. The essentials are just that, principles for living that vocation which are as enduring as those that one can find in any other masters of the spiritual life recognized by the Church. This required that I re-enter the pre-Vatican II world of theological categories and try to describe for myself, at least, what I distilled in terms as clear and contemporary as one finds in the writings of Henri Nouwen or Richard Rohr. What I offer below are reflections on the content of the *Instructions* and how I understand and attempt to express the challenge that they present to me as I seek to live our Spiritan vocation.

In the *Instructions*, Libermann, I believe, attempts to present for his followers what is his greatest longing for the way they live as Spiritans. They contain his thinking about:

1. How the Spiritan vocation embodies the relationship of Christ with the Father for the mission; that relationship being the root of all “holiness” and “perfection.”
2. How that vocation demands “putting on the mind of Christ” which Libermann calls “practical union” with God in living out the life of *agape*.
3. How meditative prayer is distinct in its focus but is necessary for growth in “practical union” with the Father.

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It becomes evident from reading the *Instructions* that these three form an integrated whole and cannot be separated. To separate the first from the other two might lead to a type of monastic spirituality rather than an apostolic one. To separate the third from the other two might lead to systems of mental prayer that are mechanistic and in some way sterile. It is “practical union,” the ongoing conscious effort to “put on the mind of Christ” in the thick of the ministry, which is the heart of the vocation to the apostolic life where all three meet.

The Spiritan Vocation: Living “the life of love and of holiness lived on earth by the Son of God in order to save and sanctify people.”

The present general council of the Congregation has invited all Spiritans to enter into a process of reflection on the first five chapters of our *Spiritane Rule of Life* as we seek to renew ourselves as a community of religious-missionaries who have a communal purpose. In chapter one of the *SRL*, “Our Spiritan Vocation,” number 3, “The Unity of Spiritan Life,” we find a definition/description of the heart of the call we share in common. It comes from the very pen of Father Libermann and is originally found in the Rule of 1849 which he himself wrote. It says:

The “apostolic life” is at the heart of our Spiritan vocation. It is “that life of love and of holiness lived on earth by the Son of God in order to save and sanctify people. By it he continually sacrificed himself, thereby glorifying the Father and saving the world.” (Rule 1849, N.D. X, 505)

This is a perfect summary of what Libermann addressed in the first seven chapters of the *Instructions*. Those chapters provide a long variation on this theme. In his introductory remarks to them, he boldly says that God is speaking through him and that the grace/love of God is “permeating my words” so that his confreres are to listen to his “voice as the voice of God.” Who

would have ever thought that humble and gentle Libermann would hazard such a bold declaration? These words indicate that what he is about to share with his confreres is serious business.

The foundation of our call is to “holiness” and “perfection,” rooted in love for God.

Finding God as the Reference for All

Libermann is clear. The foundation of our call is to “holiness” and “perfection,” rooted in love for God. It is almost as if he is out of breath in sharing his insights with his Spiritan brothers. He reminds them that “your existence on earth is a brief one in which you must learn to value all things correctly and with reference to God.” The words, “holiness” and “perfection,” tend to ring hollow to the contemporary western ear. In a culture in which political correctness requires us to submit to the principle of “I’m OK, you’re OK,” each of us becomes the only reference point and standard setter of what is good or perfect. Any expectation that we should look beyond the self to find an objective reference point for what is good or the perfect is, at least, off-putting, if not totally repugnant. In fact, the culture has within it strong forces that turn us in on the self. It is self-referential. How could anyone, like Libermann, be so presumptuous as to think that he is some kind of “medium” of the Divine pointing us beyond the self to the life of holiness as it was lived by Christ?

In a conference that he gave on 2 February 1926, Father Liagre says that like St. Thérèse of Lisieux Francis Libermann desires recipients to enter into the way of “perfection” which means that those who are still held by the bonds of sin are not the object of their teaching. People still held in the thralls of attitudes and behaviors which have not undergone conversion for the following of Christ are not the people they are addressing. They are not ready for the intensity of growth in love that Thérèse and Francis are proposing. Perfection presumes a mature capacity for total immersion in love.² Growth in perfection involves intentional self-dedication to learn to love God only and, because of that, to love the self, others, and the world as God loves them.

Perfection presumes a mature capacity for total immersion in love.

The “life of love and holiness” at the core of our call demands a state of awareness of receiving into our lives the unreasonable, unconditional, unmerited, and merciful *agape* lived by Christ so that nothing else constitutes our motive for living. He recognizes how difficult it is to receive love. Yet receptivity is the only disposition open to the creature before the Creator. He says: “the difficulty is to persuade the free and perverted wills of men to return to God and to make men *accept and offer* the merits of their Savior in atonement for their sins. Yet this conversion to God and *acceptance of the merits of Christ is precisely the work of*

those who espouse and continue the mission of Jesus Christ on earth” (emphasis mine).

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In the world of rugged individualists, to receive anything from anyone in an unmerited fashion is almost an assault on one’s individual dignity. Our psyches continue to shape our illusion that we are self-made. We will do what we want. But Libermann says just the opposite. For him, we are first and foremost receivers of God’s love, the Holy Spirit. He says: “*To make us other Christs, the Master imparts to us his Divine Spirit, invests us with his sacerdotal character, places in our hearts his divine strength; and thus transformed, we are armed with his authority, renewed by his doctrine and sanctity with which we are filled.*” This receptivity is the foundation of so much of his emphasis on docility, gentleness, availability and obedience. What we receive is captured by the Second Vatican Council when it says: “It pleased God in his goodness and wisdom to reveal himself and make known the mystery of his will (cf. Eph 1:9), by which all people through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Spirit may have access to the Father and share his life in the abundance of his love...”³ Libermann’s point in these pages is, you can’t give what you have not received. It requires receiving in order to give. Making space to receive this love is where our freedom comes alive and is engaged in the process. Practical union is the ongoing process of conscious emptying of the self to receive and respond with the same love Christ received from the Father. Every thought, feeling, and action is to be driven by this love and only by this love. A tall order.

Our Vocation is in the Love Life of Jesus

The call to participate in the holiness of the love life of Jesus involves the apostolic minister in an ongoing transformation of dispositions of heart.

To convince ourselves that Our Divine Master, in calling us to the apostolate, wills us to resemble him, we need only reflect upon the three years of his public life. Why did he and his apostles, during these three years, travel through the towns and countryside of Judea, Galilee and Samaria? Was it to convert these countries by his preaching and miracles? If this were his purpose, why were the results so meager after so much labor even after his divine and bitter passion? Had Our Lord intended to convert the people of Judea and Samaria by preaching, the Divine Power which dwelt substantially in him would have easily attained the result he desired.

But during his public life Jesus wished to show not only the apostles but to all those he would later send to souls throughout the world, how they were to live in every circumstance, how they were to act towards others, how they were to speak, to suffer, to work for salvation of souls... He told them: 'I have given you an example that as I have done to you, so you also should do' (John 13:15). This he said after giving us such a great example of the charity and the docile and obedient humility that should motivate all our relations with our fellowmen... These words, 'I have given you an example,' crowned his whole life in the midst of the apostles, and taught them that in all things they were to follow their Master's example.

Without the love-life – holiness – in union with the Father, even his passion and death would have been in vain. It is only the conscious living out of Divine Love at every moment that redeems the world.

Jesus is instructing his apostles to follow him in conscious, reflective ways. They cannot do this merely by washing the outside of the cup while not touching the inside. He is forming them in ongoing awareness and consciousness of every movement of their heart, mind, and emotions by teaching them how his love-life with the Father flows into the practice of his servant-hood. Without the love-life – holiness – in union with the Father, even his passion and death would have been in vain. It is only the conscious living out of Divine Love at every moment that redeems the world. To the extent that the apostles get "It" they participate in the apostolic life. To the extent that love does not pervade their consciousness and shape their intentions and motives, they haven't grasped fully the beauty of their calling to full actual union with God.

...participation in the love life of God is the only foundation for the apostolic life.

Libermann says that the three-year period of formation that the apostles received from Christ was directed to their growth in receiving and sharing love in the concrete, everyday circumstances of the realities of life. He knows that missionaries will continue to struggle with self-centeredness, self-interest, lack of hope, in so many of the challenges they meet as the apostles did—Peter's denials, the sad walk to Emmaus, lack of clarity about where Jesus is going and the way to get there. His call to practical union, or as he calls it in other places, *habitual union or actual union*, can only be understood when we have grasped that participation in the love life of God is the only foundation for the apostolic life. He chooses John's account of the Eucharist to illustrate what this means by focusing on the practical consequences of Jesus fulfilling his mission to love in the context of passing over to the Father in everyday life. This unity in love life with the Father rests on the *motives of the heart and intentions* (what we are tending

towards) behind every moment of every day, every word spoken, every gesture, every decision, and every action undertaken. It is consciousness of loving relationship expressed in “This is my son, my beloved, listen to him.” It is the Father’s joyful pleasure to reveal himself to the world through Christ’s everyday life. A Spiritan’s “formation program and process” is brought about in this relationship. If they are to join Christ in doing “work,” it consists in complete consciousness and awareness that at every moment of their lives they are receiving the love of the Father that enabled them to serve others in such a way that they, too, will be moved to share that love with others.

...the importance of prayer and meditation as the way to grow in practical union.

The Primacy of Holiness

Libermann uses nearly half of the *Instructions* to explain what he means by the primacy of holiness. This is the way he prepares the reader for the chapters dedicated to “practical union with God” and the importance of prayer and meditation as the way to grow in practical union. For me, Libermann’s Jewishness is most clearly seen in his awareness of how we live in union with God in everyday life. The Hebrew Scriptures speak of the “just man” who seeks to love God with all his mind, all his heart, and all his soul in living the Torah. That justice consists in living the right relationships defined by the Torah. Its fulfillment is found in the joyful self-revelation of God who is Love and the law of love revealed in Christ. For Libermann, there is no pie in the sky, but there is a meal to be eaten on earth. To eat that meal it takes apostles who are both guests and hosts of the meal and are clearly aware of having received the *dulcis Hospes animae* (sweet Guest of the soul), the Holy Spirit. It is Spirit-aware hosts who can prepare the table and the meal, wash feet intentionally creating the space for those coming to the table to break bread together, have their eyes opened in receiving the Love that makes their sharing of it irresistible. Libermann is describing the life of the Christ-centered “upright man,” the term used by Matthew to describe Joseph, the Jew practiced in doing the will of God at every turn of life’s road (Matt. 1:19; cf. also Psalm 1).

Titles and subtitles of the chapters dedicated to holiness and perfection in the *Instructions* develop Libermann’s variations on the theme. Some of them are:

- 1) our obligation to seek it;
- 2) the disastrous consequences of our lack of it;
- 3) the example and words of our Lord in describing it and so on.

Chapter III is entitled “Degrees of Holiness in our Works.” It is all about how every aspect of our love-life as persons must be intensified by God’s ongoing love in our lives (sanctifying grace). Libermann deeply appreciates that God’s ongoing love in our lives presumes and builds on *our capacity to love ourselves* because we are created in his image. He says *we must love ourselves*.

God has endowed human nature with a certain love for self which man is *incapable of suppressing or opposing*. God has willed it to such an extent, that he has set it up as the standard for charity towards our neighbor: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Sanctifying grace quickens this natural propensity by adding to it an ardent desire for God, so that we tend entirely towards him (emphasis mine).

God’s Continuous Love for the Person He Created

Again, in our contemporary context, our western individualism has worked against our ability to love ourselves appropriately and direct this self-love to its proper end. We seek “self-help” methods and techniques to overcome any defective self-perception through will power. This presumes, however, that our self-love is defined in cultural terms. Libermann knows that God loves the persons whom he has created. God wants us to embrace the beauty of our personhood knowing that we are loved by him. The old adage is: *gratia supponit naturam*. One way of translating this might be, “God loves the person he created in his image in an ongoing way as that person is.” God meets us and loves us where we are and how we are along life’s road. But this also presumes that the person, with his or her distorted self-image and self-seeking, realizes we must also love ourselves as we are while longing for the happiness that comes from being loved and loving as Christ loves. Excessive self-analysis and self-criticism also undermine the free-flowing gift of God’s love.

Here again we find in this love of self what God has placed in our nature, namely, the tendency towards happiness. Grace [God’s love for us] supernaturalized this tendency [enables us to go beyond the limited way we love] and makes us desire and hope in eternal happiness in God as well as fear the eternal wretchedness of separation from him [living in the enclosed world of distorted self-love].

Unless we grasp how much Libermann appreciates the beauty of the human person created with the ability to relate lovingly as God loves the person, we will have a hard time accepting all of the emphasis that Libermann places on “self-abnegation” beginning

God wants us to embrace the beauty of our personhood knowing that we are loved by him.

in Chapter VI. Throughout his writings Libermann repeatedly refers to “abandonment” and “self-abnegation.” So much so, that it can seem like overkill. It can be perceived as a very negative approach to the spiritual life, especially for persons who may have shaky or negative perceptions of themselves. Often they wonder whether they even have a self to deny in order to become more loving in their relationships. Actually, for me, there is something positive underlying Libermann’s emphasis on self-abnegation or self-denial. He expects a great deal of action on our part in stretching our hearts to receive the love that God wants to give us. His is an active-receptivity engaging our will and freedom. We control what we receive or give. Self-denial is a choice, an act on our part which focuses us on one thing and one thing only, “to live the life of love and holiness that the Son of God lived...”

Allowing Christ’s Self-emptying Love to Perfect Us

Transformative growth inherent in the habitual union of the apostolic life engages all of our faculties with full force: intellect, will, emotions, body, and psyche. Libermann is very aware that “Adam’s Fall” strongly inclines man “to refer all his actions to himself” rather than to God. The activity of practical union with God is precisely to pull man out of *any* reference to self that would block love being the only motive for our action. And he means *any reference to the self*. The way we converse, the language we use, the way we think, the way we behave, and especially the way we feel must be free of any reference to the self. Our part is to discipline ourselves in such a way that we allow God’s love to shape all of these by love for the glory of God. This is “actual union with God” that engages our self-abnegation in order to focus on God alone.⁴ This is very daunting, to say the least. Yet, in it, Libermann holds in balance both our free will and total dependence on God. Libermann would never let his followers or directees be duped into thinking that the spiritual life could be reduced to conformist routines of any sort. Abnegation is practiced in order to give reign to the authentic self while living in loving relationships. We are the only ones who can deny the “evils flowing from selfishness and pride,” “evils caused by sensuality,” the limits of “intelligence largely obscured,” “hearts weighed down by languor,” the “limits of our natural temperament.” In a way, Libermann’s heavy emphasis on self-abnegation, the emptying of the self, is his way of saying, “The evangelizer must first be evangelized;” or, the evangelizer has to be involved in an ongoing process of being evangelized. Self-abnegation is the process in which the evangelizer, touched and moved by love, puts self-referential tendencies aside so that God’s pleasure in revealing himself may be seen clearly in the way we live.

Our part is to discipline ourselves in such a way that we allow God’s love to shape all of these by love for the glory of God. This is “actual union with God” that engages our self-abnegation in order to focus on God alone.

Liebermann holds in balance:

- 1) His appreciation of the beauty of the human person and requisite self-love;
- 2) The total engagement of the person and all one's faculties in one's loving relationship with God and the world; and
- 3) The necessity for dedicated self-abnegation moved by and flowing from love as the remedy against all the disorders of the soul.

This is, in part, why Liebermann could say and mean it in its most profound sense: *God is all, man is nothing.*"

Mental Prayer: A Discipline and Practice Essential for Growth in Practical Union

Liebermann spends the last four chapters of the *Instructions* (actually completed by others based on his other writings) on how mental prayer is a discipline, a practice in prayerful focus, that sharpens our capacity to live fully aware lives in practical, actual, everyday love of God and neighbor.

As noted above, Liebermann was very skeptical about "systems of spirituality" that strait-jacket and ignore the uniqueness of persons. Yet, he is very conscious of how much human beings need disciplines and practices which provide a framework for developing and reshaping their habits of thinking, feeling and loving. He clearly embraces the necessity of setting aside regular times to focus our minds and hearts on the love God offers us to grow in loving relationships. We are body and spirit. We have to slow the body and mind down, seek silence. This is also reflected in our *Spiritan Rule of Life*. "We have got to set aside a substantial time for prayer, deeply united to Jesus," as "Jesus used to go away by himself to pray" (SRL, no. 90). "In prayer we are purified and we are changed by the Holy Spirit" (SRL, no. 87).

In Chapter X he says:

Mental prayer consists in turning away and withdrawing our mind from creatures, and applying it directly to God in a spirit of faith for the purpose of loving union with him.

Thus, in both mental prayer and practical union the soul unites itself to God through faith and love. Still there is a difference. In practical union, the soul keeps up relations with creatures in accord with the order of God's will, but

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it obeys and cleaves to the grace with which it is animated and unites itself to God in its labors. But in mental prayer, the soul momentarily breaks off all relations with creatures and musters all its faculties concentrating them on God in a spirit of faith in order to unite itself to him in love.

Mental prayer comprises “three acts: recollection, fixed adherence, and a union of wills in love.” It is time when “the soul...is very receptive to God.” Our difficulty in slowing down the mind and emotions in order to focus on God is a result of our “attachment to things,” “attachment to self...the worst of all obstacles.”

...Libermann’s respect for the uniqueness of every person comes through. People experience the discipline and practice of mental prayer differently.

The object of mental prayer is “the absorption of the mind and heart in God.” Its “value lies in love.”

Throughout his correspondence with priests, seminarians, and laity, Libermann’s respect for the uniqueness of every person comes through. People experience the discipline and practice of mental prayer differently. His practicality shows through when he recognizes sources of difficulties that we experience in the practice of mental prayer. They lie “in the nature of our temperament or in habits contracted under the influence of external conditions, such as a heavy climate or excessive heat.” Nonetheless, “we must renew and increase the energetic resolutions taken during meditations.” The object of mental prayer is “the absorption of the mind and heart in God.” Its “value lies in love.”⁵

He says: “I am sure we have good intentions when we pray, but we also have our nature with us... Most of the time we will be unsuccessful in our efforts and simply pass the time in dull boredom.” But when we learn to collect ourselves and focus, “we are receptive to special graces, and [our] recollection becomes more and more intense, more absorbing, more determined and more solid. For Libermann, mental prayer is like the time lovers spend together in the most intimate way.

Conclusion

Libermann’s *Instructions* flow from his personal experience in “walking the walk.” He wrote them with the deepest gentleness and concern for men who were following a call to communicate God’s love to others in some of the most difficult geographic, climactic, lonely, and trying circumstances that could be imagined. He and they understood that they would, like Abraham, be following a call to leave their land and culture of origin, their kindred and their father’s house for a country that God would show them. That “land” or “country” would be found first and foremost in their hearts where the Spirit dwells.

There would be no walls of a monastery to provide them with the stability that they would yearn for. Their stability was to be found within their actual union with God in everyday life...

There would be no walls of a monastery to provide them with the stability that they would yearn for. Their stability was to be found within their actual union with God in everyday life so that their charisms would be blessings for those whom they served in loving relationship. Libermann never veered from his simple and complete understanding and vision of the Spiritan vocation to the apostolic life that is deeply embedded in the New Testament. This is especially true in the Gospel of John for which he had a deep affection and to which he was attached in a special way. The *Instructions* keep our eyes riveted on one thing and one thing only – to love the Father as Christ did and serve the world which God still so loves, because God so madly takes joyful pleasure in revealing to us that he is Love.

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Endnotes

¹In the introduction to his translation van de Putte says: “The *Instructions for Missionaries* are a translation of the *Instructions sur la Santeté*, the first part of the *Directoire Spirituel* (pp. 3-179). These instructions were originally published in the *Écrits Spirituels*, pp. 365-539, under the title *Instructions aux Missionnaires*. They were divided into five chapters. In the *Directoire Spirituel*, from which this translation has been made, the division into chapters has been multiplied, and subtitles have been added.” Unfinished by Libermann, Chapters XII-XIV were completed by the editors of the *Directoire Spirituel*.

²*Les ames encore retenues par les liens du péché sont en dehors de leur preoccupation et de leur enseignement. Ce n'est que par hazard et comme en passant qu'ils y font allusion.*” (p. 2)

³*Dei Verbum*, no. 2

⁴Father Liagre states: “...*La doctrine du Venerable Père est, d'abord une doctrine de renoncement*: le renoncement, telle en serait la note caracteristique” (p. 2: Libermann's doctrine is *above all* a doctrine of *renunciation*: renunciation as such will be the central element in his teaching). It is the *leitmotif* of his teaching, but it is a renunciation focused on our way of loving, and it is love of God *ex toto corde* (with the whole heart).

⁵Chapter XIII and XIV of the work were completed by others. They describe traditional forms of mental prayer as well as subjects proposed for meditation.